

Iran's Holiday Prologue to Exploiting Nuclear Loopholes

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Although Tehran refrained from using its annual 'Nuclear Day' to threaten a wholesale breakout, it seems determined to push the West's boundaries on centrifuge technology and other issues.

Since 2006, Iran has celebrated its annual "National Nuclear Technology Day" on the twentieth of Farvardin, which fell on April 9 this year. Typically, the holiday has served as an occasion to threaten the West by unveiling (and often exaggerating) nuclear advancements. This year's festivities largely continued that tradition, though with various wrinkles that may signal a shift in how Tehran pressures its European partners in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

CENTRIFUGE THREATS, IRGC DEFIANCE

The facilities and capabilities revealed during Iran's past nuclear holidays include mastery of industrial uranium enrichment (2007), a nuclear fuel manufacturing plant near Isfahan (2009), and development of "third-generation centrifuges" (2010)—all of which the regime threateningly touted as proof that it had joined the "nuclear club of nations." This routine was interrupted by sensitivities surrounding the nuclear deal in 2015-2017, then resumed in 2018 under the shadow of President Trump's pledge to withdraw from the JCPOA. Yet none of the eighty-three projects announced last year indicated major improvement in the nuclear program, and the regime never followed through on its threat to resume full-scale uranium enrichment if Washington left the deal.

This year, Iran inaugurated 114 new advancements in the fields of nuclear "exploration, extraction, fuel cycle, power plants, science, and technologies," with a special focus on the nuclear industry's contribution to medicine. Yet the festivities peaked with provocative remarks by President Hassan Rouhani, who used the podium to lash out at Washington's [decision to designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization earlier this week. After accusing the United States of fomenting terrorism itself, he reassured the audience that the regime is unified in backing the Guards—an unusual move given that Tehran rarely links its annual IRGC Day (also held April 9) and Nuclear Day.

To prove that the regime will continue enhancing its nuclear and military programs in the face of U.S. interference, Rouhani ordered the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) to install twenty advanced IR-6 centrifuges in the Natanz enrichment facility. In doing so, he warned Washington that further pressure would lead Tehran to introduce even more advanced units: "If you continue to walk down this road, you will see the IR-8 centrifuge in the near future." He then addressed Europe, emphasizing that Tehran has "exercised patience" and will continue doing so, but that it "may take steps" if a certain "threshold" is reached—probably referring to the regime's view that the Special Purpose Vehicle established earlier this year is an insufficient mechanism for facilitating trade.

AEOI director Ali Akbar Salehi later remarked that Iran is producing and upgrading centrifuges in accordance with its commitments, and his deputy, Behrouz Kamalvandi, shed more light on the issue. Noting that the new IR-6 installation was conducted in the framework of the JCPOA, Kamalvandi explained that "having done a ten-centrifuge cascade successfully, when you go after a twenty-centrifuge cascade, technically you're preparing for industrial production of centrifuges." He then clarified that Iran will stay at twenty IR-6 units until 2024, then start mass producing them.

The nuclear deal allows Iran to conduct limited R&D on advanced centrifuges so long as it does not accumulate enriched uranium, in accordance with Tehran's "enrichment R&D plan." Specifically, it allows the regime to test the IR-6 model on "single centrifuge machines and intermediate cascades" (i.e., sets of connected centrifuges), and to commence "testing of up to thirty centrifuge machines" in mid-2024.

Yet the main text of the JCPOA does not clearly define the cap on R&D efforts before 2024. Those commitments are allegedly spelled out in the aforementioned R&D plan, a separate roadmap for advanced centrifuge development that Iran negotiated as part of the JCPOA process. The plan has never officially been made public, but the [Associated Press reportedly obtained a copy](#) soon after the JCPOA was implemented in 2016. Although the authenticity of this copy has not been confirmed, it echoes some of Kamalvandi's latest remarks. According to the AP version, the R&D plan allows Iran to test the IR-6 model with uranium on intermediate cascades with "roughly ten centrifuges and then roughly twenty centrifuges."

Several European diplomats have already said they are reviewing whether Tehran's latest IR-6 move is in line with the JCPOA. Whatever the outcome, this incident illustrates the longstanding need to open the contents of the "enrichment R&D plan" for public review—a step that may deter Iran from pushing the JCPOA's boundaries any further.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Aside from the IR-6 announcement and IRGC outburst, Iranian officials were surprisingly low-key in describing their nuclear gains and talking about the West. Unlike in 2018, this year's holiday statements avoided claims that Iran could quickly restart its full nuclear program or reach the ridiculous enrichment goal of 190,000 separative work units. Salehi even noted that regime officials should "take into account the fact that the enemy is seeking to provoke Iran into hasty reactions," implying that they should show restraint. This change in rhetoric may reflect Tehran's failure to push back effectively against the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" approach, perhaps indicating that it will pursue a more cautious path for the duration of President Trump's current term.

Salehi is certainly familiar with such tactics—on January 22, he defended Iran's decision to stay in the JCPOA amid U.S. pressure, but also listed various nuclear steps the regime is taking to send "the necessary message" without breaching the deal or escalating the situation. He emphasized that these steps are possible because "the nuclear talks left so many breaches in the agreement for Iran to exploit" (much as it has done with other international agreements and norms). In that sense, this year's nuclear holiday could mark the first in a series of new Iranian attempts [to exploit loopholes in the JCPOA](#), both to signal that the regime's patience with Europe is growing thin and to build a narrative of resistance around the nuclear program.

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